United States Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management

Upper Snake Field Office
1405 Hollipark Ave
Idaho Falls, ID 83401

Scoping/Information Package
Shotgun Valley Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration Environmental Assessment

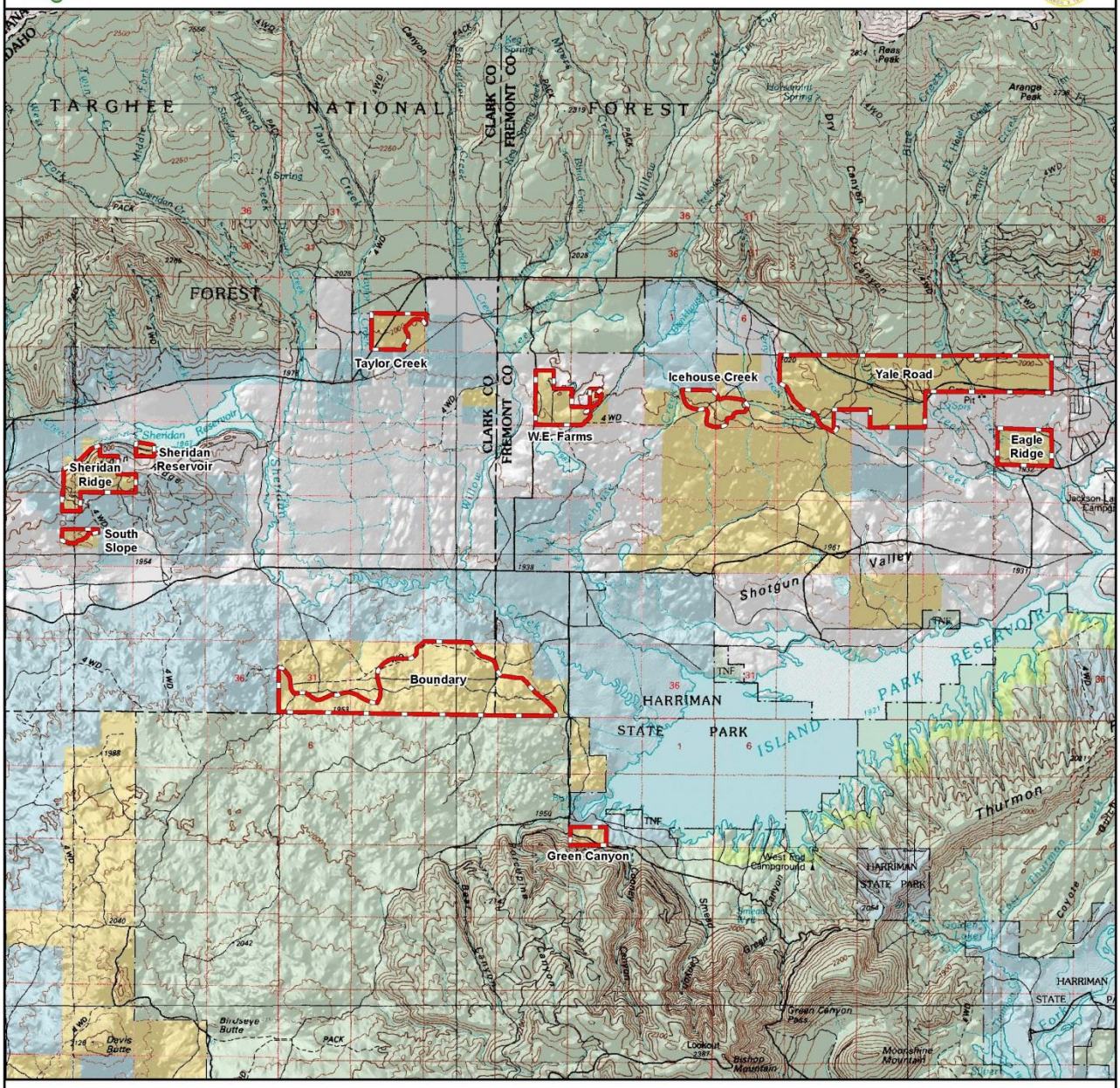
This scoping package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to reduce hazardous fuel accumulations and improve forest community health on public lands within the Shotgun Valley in accordance with the *Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) 1985* (DOI-BLM 1985) as amended by the *Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (DOI-BLM 2008). The purpose of this package is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis of the proposal. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with NEPA and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences. Analysis of the proposal will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of November 2015. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the Proposed Action and to identify alternatives to the Proposed Action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

Project Area Description and Existing Condition

The Shotgun Valley project is located at the northeastern margin of the Eastern Snake River Plain, approximately 6 miles west of Island Park, Idaho. The approximately 4,283 acre project area is comprised of 10 parcels of BLM-administered public lands (see map on next page). The project area is located in whole or in part within Townships 12 & 13 North, Ranges 40, 41 & 42 East. The individual parcels within the project area are disconnected from one another by adjacent private lands or lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service or State of Idaho. Portions of the Shotgun Valley project area have been designated as a wildland-urban interface (WUI) area due to the presence of homes and other human developments adjacent to the public lands within the eastern treatment units (Fremont County 2004). Of the approximately 4,283 acres identified for treatment, 1,781 acres are within the Sheridan Creek Watershed while the remaining 2,502 acres are within the Henry's Fork-Island Park Reservoir Watershed.

Starting in the1960s and continuing through the early part of the 1970s, many of the forested BLM lands within the Shotgun Valley and surrounding areas were infested by an epidemic level of mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*). The BLM subsequently salvaged thousands of acres of beetle killed timber during the latter part of the 1970s. Following the salvage program the BLM replanted the harvested areas, creating what is now an overabundance of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) plantations that have received very little maintenance since their initial establishment some 30 to 40 years ago.

Sheridan Ridge / Shotgun Valley Fuels Project Map



Legend

- Shotgun Valley Project Boundary

Surface Management

- Bureau of Land Management
- Bureau of Reclaimation
- Department of Energy - INL
- Indian Reservation
- Military Reservations and Corps of Engineers
- National Park Service
- National Wildlife Refuge
- Private
- State of Idaho
- US Forest Service
- Other

NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PUBLIC LANDS

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).
The accuracy, reliability,or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data is not guaranteed.

Produced: September 2013
Projection: UTM Zone 12 North NAD 1983
Location: R:\loc\Fuels\Project\Sheridan Ridge-Shotgun Valley\Data\jpeg_PDF

Location Map

As a result, the area currently consists of a mixture of two dominant conifer vegetation classes; multi-aged, densely stocked, closed canopy stands of Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and young, even-aged, densely stocked plantations of lodgepole pine. The Douglas-fir stands have experienced varying levels of infestation of Spruce budworm (*Choristoneura occidentalis*), Tussock moth (*Orgyia pseudotsugata*), and Douglas-fir beetle (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae*) over the last 10 years. As these forests become denser, competition among trees increases for limiting factors, such as moisture or nutrients, further stressing the trees and making them more vulnerable to insect attack (O'Laughlin et al. 1993).

Furthermore, aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) stands within the project area are categorized as even-aged and decadent, are being encroached upon by adjacent conifer tree species, and lack the level of reproduction necessary to maintain healthy clones. Aspens are considered a keystone species and are critical for maintaining biodiversity in western landscapes, where clones regenerate primarily through vegetative reproduction triggered by hormonal stimulation of underground root buds initiated by disturbance (Jones et al. 2005). Douglas-fir within the project area have been expanding into many of the historic aspen clones due to the modification of the natural fire regime, which had historically provided the disturbance necessary to maintain the clone and thus had kept the species out of the aspen stands. The existing conditions are primarily the result of fire suppression activities and a lack of forest management that have contributed to high tree densities and poor growth rates and tree vigor.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the Shotgun Valley project is to protect the home developments, ranches, and businesses adjacent to the project area that make up the Island Park community from large, uncharacteristic, high-intensity wildland fire. Additionally, this project aims to protect important wildlife habitat, improve forest health, and promote aspen regeneration and expansion. Heavy fuel loads within the project area have created conditions that would support the development of high-intensity wildland fires and the potential for unacceptable losses and impacts. As a result, the proposed fuel reduction and forestry treatments are needed to reduce the large volume of vegetation build up, consisting of young lodgepole pine and densely stocked stands of Douglas-fir, which are creating a risk to the surrounding federal, state, and developed private lands. The proposed fuels reduction treatments would be designed to reduce forest vegetation fuel loadings, decrease fire intensity and behavior, aid in wildland fire suppression activities, provide for firefighter and public safety, and improve ecosystem health in the forested vegetation types present in the project area.

Management actions are needed to reduce the risk to private lands and public land resources, as well as providing for improved public and firefighter safety from uncharacteristic wildland fire. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to:

- Protect and enhance healthy conifer stands by reducing the density of young suppressed trees that may propagate surface fires into the forest crowns or increase the stands' susceptibility to insects and disease.
- Reduce hazardous fuel loading (vertical and horizontal continuity of ladder fuels) to prevent uncharacteristic wildfires and resultant resource damage, while providing conditions so wildfire can safely take its role in the ecosystem.
- Improve the health, vigor, and acreage of aspen stands and promote natural regeneration of aspens.
- Maintain or improve wildlife habitat by providing multiple successional stages of more diverse vegetative communities.

Preliminary Description of Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would focus on reducing hazardous fuel accumulations and improving forest and shrub community health through the use of mechanical treatments (e.g., chainsaws, other hand tools, and heavy mechanical equipment), prescribed fire, and biomass utilization on approximately 2,667 acres throughout the Shotgun Valley and surrounding areas. Implementation would consist of the treatment of approximately two to four areas annually over a 10 year period, with treatment areas ranging in size from 20 to 225 acres. The Proposed Action would be broken up into three treatment priorities: WUI Fuel Breaks (808 acres), Habitat Improvement/Forest Health (1,751 acres), and Aspen Health (108 acres). Each of these treatments is briefly described below.

WUI Fuel Break Treatments:

WUI treatments would occur on BLM administered lands within a 1,000 foot buffer adjacent to developed private property. A variety of treatment methods would be used, including mechanical harvesting, in order to reach fuel reduction goals and objectives. Mechanical harvesting would be employed to reduce costs of the treatment and to facilitate removal of useable wood products. Treatments would be designed to reduce stand density and understory ladder fuels within conifer stands, while increasing tree and crown spacing so as to reduce the occurrence of crown fires. Resulting slash from treatments would be piled and burned, chipped, or removed off site (if accessible and/or feasible). Attempts would be made to promote the utilization of biomass (e.g., chip and/or firewood collection and whole tree utilization such as post and poles) when possible. A total of 808 acres would be treated, with treatments focused in and around those populated areas within the northern extent of the Shotgun Valley. The following specific treatments could occur within these areas:

- Ladder Fuels
  - Thin all standing conifers 12 inch diameter at breast height (dbh) and under to a tree spacing of 30 feet in stands dominated by young, single age-class canopies.
  - In mixed age-class canopies, remove young conifers (12 inch dbh and under) located directly under the outer circumference of the mature canopy and out to a spacing of 30 feet from the edge of the canopy drip line.
  - Remaining conifers would be pruned up to a height of 6 feet while shrubs and other ground fuels would be removed from around the tree boles.
  - In aspen colonies having a patch size of at least one-quarter acre, all conifers 12 inch dbh and under would be removed from within the aspen colonies and out to a distance of approximately 75 feet.
- Commercial Thinning
  - Conifers between 12 and 27 inch dbh would be selectively harvested to approximately 40-70 square feet of basal area.
  - Conifers would be removed from within aspen colonies and out to a distance of approximately 75 feet, with the exception of large trees displaying old characteristics which would be given a priority to be left and protected as long as the project goals and objectives are being met.

Habitat Improvement and Forest Health Treatments:

These treatments would include selective thinning, thinning from below, and small scattered patch cuts (< 2 acres in size). Thinning from below is the removal of intermediate and codominant trees to favor the large, high quality trees in the upper crown classes. The trees removed during thinnings are typically high risk trees, trees that are crowding desirable trees, undesirable species and trees of poor quality and low vigor. Treatments would strive to break up the continuity of forest fuels while leaving larger diameter trees and aspen, where present, thereby reducing the potential for ground fires to transition to the forest crown and allowing wildfire to return to a natural cycle, where possible. The thinned material would be

either lopped and scattered or piled. Thinning treatments would reduce tree density and allow remaining trees to receive more sunlight, water, and nutrients, which would improve forest health and vigor, as well as improve drought and disease resistance. Resulting slash from treatments would be piled and burned, broadcast burned, chipped, or removed off site (if accessible and/or feasible). Attempts would be made to promote the utilization of biomass; however, low intensity prescribed fire would be the preferred method where conditions permit and the reintroduction of fire is strategically and environmentally feasible.

The BLM's stewardship contracting tool for managing and restoring federal lands may be used for implementation of portions of the Proposed Action. For the purposes of this project, stewardship contracting could involve the exchange of wood products from public lands (e.g., post and poles) for a local contractor's service (e.g., fuels reduction). Wildlife habitat improvement treatments would encourage the natural regeneration of aspen with a targeted density of 1,000 suckers per acre, maintenance of adequate thermal cover, and an increase in understory herbaceous vegetation. Additionally, increasing aspen densities within the treatment areas may further help to reduce fire intensity due to the species' fire resistant properties. A total of 1,751 acres would be treated under this treatment priority. The following could occur within these areas:

- Pre-commercial Thinning
    - Thin all standing conifers 8 inch dbh and under leaving a tree spacing of 20 feet in stands dominated by young, single age-class canopies.
    - In mixed age-class canopies, remove young conifers (8 inch dbh and under) located directly under the outer circumference of the mature canopy and out to a spacing of 20 feet from the edge of the canopy drip line.
    - Remaining conifers would be pruned up to a height of 6 feet while shrubs and other ground fuels would be removed from around the tree boles.
- Commercial Thinning (Douglas-fir)
    - Conifers between 8 and 27 inch dbh would be selectively harvested to approximately 40-70 square feet of basal area.
    - Live, healthy conifers 28 inch dbh and greater displaying late seral characteristics would not be cut as long as the project goals and objectives are being met.
    - Conifers would be removed from within aspen colonies and out to a distance of approximately 75 feet, with the exception of large trees displaying old characteristics which would be given a priority to be left and protected as long as the project goals and objectives are being met.
- Commercial Thinning (Lodgepole pine)
    - Thin all standing lodgepoles leaving a tree spacing of up to 30 feet (± 10 feet) spaced off the largest available trees.
    - In pockets of smaller lodgepole (<8 inch) space residual trees 15 feet.

Aspen Health Treatments:

Aspen health treatments would focus on reducing encroaching conifers from within existing aspen stands. Treatments would encourage the natural regeneration of aspen through the removal of encroaching conifers with the target of increasing aspen sucker density to 1,000 suckers per acre. Additionally, increasing aspen densities within the treatment areas may further help to reduce fire intensity due to the species' fire resistant properties. Treatment slash would be piled and burned, broadcast burned, chipped, or removed off site (if accessible and/or feasible). While attempts would be made to promote the utilization of biomass, the use of prescribed fire in the form of broadcast burns would be the preferred method of slash disposal due to fire's ability to further promote aspen regeneration. A total of 108 acres would be treated under this treatment type.

The following could occur within the aspen health treatment areas:

- Remove all standing conifers 28 inch dbh and under from within existing aspen stands.
- In mature, single age class aspen stands, up to 1/3 of the mature aspens may be girdled or fallen to initiate the suckering response and aid in the regeneration of the stand.

Monitoring and Design Features and Mitigation Measures

A number of design features and mitigation measures would be implemented as part of the selected alternative to reduce potential impacts to resources. These measures would address spread of invasive species, buffers around riparian/wetland areas, and surveys for cultural resources and sensitive plants and wildlife, among other resource concerns. Monitoring would be used to gauge the effectiveness of the treatments and to identify where further treatments would be needed.

Preliminary Issues

During internal scoping with an interdisciplinary team of specialists the following preliminary issues were identified (Table 1). These issues will be addressed in the EA.

Table 1. Preliminary Issues Identified for the Analysis.

Resource	Resource Issue
Air Quality	How would air quality be affected by the proposed treatments, particularly by burning that could occur as part of the actions?
Cultural Resources	How would the proposed treatments affect cultural resources, such as sites and historic trails which are located within the project area?
Economic and Social Values	How would grazing permittees or other operators be affected by the proposed treatments? How would the proposed treatments affect private land or other public land in the project vicinity?
Forest Resources	How would forest resources be affected by the proposed treatments?
Invasive, Non-Native Species	How would the proposed treatments impact the abundance and distribution of invasive/non-native species in the treatment areas?
Recreation	How would recreation be affected by the proposed treatments?
Soil Resources	How would the proposed treatments affect soils (productivity, infiltration, and ground cover)?
Vegetation (Including Riparian Areas and Wetlands)	How would the proposed treatments impact vegetation resources including wetlands and riparian areas?
Visual Resources	How would the proposed treatments affect the character of the viewshed and the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the landscape?
Water Quality	How would the proposed treatments affect water quality?

Decision to be Made

The Upper Snake Field Manager is the official responsible for decisions regarding the management of BLM administered lands within the project area. Based on the results of the NEPA analysis, the Field Manager will determine if the action would have significant effects; if so, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be prepared. If the action would not have significant effects, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) would be prepared. Following appropriate NEPA analysis, the Field Manager would issue a decision document consistent with the regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), 43 CFR 4120.3 range improvement projects, and Secretarial Order 3336 range fire prevention, management, and restoration. The Field Manager will decide whether to select the proposed action or an alternative to the proposed action analyzed within the scope of the Shotgun Valley EA, or to take no action.

Public Input Needed

Local involvement is critical when planning projects and setting project priorities. Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action and alternatives and preliminary issues discussed above as well as any management alternatives and issues that should be analyzed to help ensure the completeness of the EA. The BLM will refine the draft proposed action and/or develop additional alternatives for inclusion in the Draft EA as needed, based on the issues raised during the public scoping period. Issues that are outside of the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by August 1, 2015 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA. When submitting comments please include your name, address, and telephone number, and any facts and issues specific to this proposal that you would like the BLM to consider during the development of the EA. In addition, please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Comments should be sent to Ben Dyer, Idaho Falls District Office, 1405 Hollipark Ave., Idaho Falls, Idaho 83401 or via email to bdyer@blm.gov.

An open house will be held at the Island Park EMS building (located across from the Island Park Library at 4377 County Circle) on Thursday July 16, 2015 from 3-6 p.m. in order to provide an opportunity for the public to learn more about the project and provide comments on the fuels reduction and forest health treatments proposed in the Shotgun Valley project area.

For any questions related to this proposal please contact one of the following:

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